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Severely damaged vehicles lie among debris in Kharkiv city centre in in Ukraine that came under relentless artillery fire by Russia | AP

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HUNDREDS TRAPPED AS RUSSIA BOMBS THEATRE

Russian air strikes targeted a theatre in besieged Mariupol where civilians were taking shelter, Ukrainian officials said

BIDEN CALLS PUTIN A WAR CRIMINAL

At least 500 civilians, including children, were in the building at the time of attack, according to the Human Rights Watch. Reports said the theatre's bomb shelter withstood the attack and efforts are under way to rescue the trapped people. President Vladimir Putin came under further pressure as his US counterpart Joe Biden called him a "war criminal"

21 KILLED IN ATTACK ON KHARKIV SCHOOL

- At least 21 people were killed in Russian shelling of a school and a cultural centre, in Ukraine's second-largest city of Kharkiv
- Meanwhile, Biden will speak to Chinese President Xi Jinping on Friday about the conflict as pressure mounts on Beijing to condemn the actions of its ally Russia | P12

31.7 LAKH

PEOPLE HAVE LEFT UKRAINE SINCE THE CONFLICT BEGAN, SAYS U.N.

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TIRUCHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARMAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

Rejected ₹25 cr Pegasus deal, reveals Mamata

TDP rubbishes her claim that Naidu govt bought it, but agrees spyware was hawked

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Kolkata /Vijayawada

A day after she dropped the Pegasus bomb on the floor of state Assembly, West Bengal Chief Minister on Thursday shared further details on how the intrusive Israeli spyware that was claimed to be sold only to vetted governments, was actually hawked to various police departments across India.

The West Bengal police was approached at least four to five years ago with an offer to sell Pegasus for just ₹25 crore, she said.

"They (the NSO that developed Pegasus) had approached everybody to sell their ware. They had approached our police too four-five years ago and offered to sell it for ₹25 crore. I had the information, but I said that we did not require it," Mamata said at the state secretariat.

If it was used for the benefit of the country or for security reasons then it was a different matter altogether, but it has been used for political purposes, against judges, officers which is not at all welcomed

Mamata Banerjee

That Pegasus was indeed offered to other states as well was confirmed by Nara Lokesh, Telegu Desam Party general secretary and son of the then Andhra Pradesh chief minister Chandrababu Naidu. "Yes, Pegasus offered to sell its spyware to the AP government as well, but we rejected it," said Nara Lokesh, who was the then minister for information technology in the government.

Nara Lokesh's statement was also a rebuttal of Mamata's allegation on Wednesday that the Chandrababu government had actually bought Pegasus. He said Mamata was "misinformed" if indeed she had actually made the statement, adding that had the Andhra government purchased the spyware, there would be a record of it. "We never purchased any spyware. We never indulged in any illegal phone tapping," Nara Lokesh asserted.

"If there had been any such thing, would the (current) Jagan regime spare us? In the past three years, they have tried every trick to fix us in one thing or the other but failed, because we did nothing wrong," he maintained.

Mamata alleged that the Central government had purchased it for "political" purposes and not for the country's security, adding they used it to snoop on judges and officers. At present, an expert panel set up by the Supreme Court is examining charges of Pegasus misuse by the Centre.

HECTIC PARLEYS IN CONG TO AVERT CRISIS

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ New Delhi

After the much-hyped meeting of dissident leaders, known as the Group of 23, or G-23, on Wednesday, hectic parleys began among Congress leaders to ward off an organisational crisis with former party president Rahul Gandhi reaching out to senior leader Bhupinder Singh Hooda. According to sources, the two discussed plans to restructure and strengthen the party, necessitated by the disastrous performance in the recently concluded assembly elections in five states.

Hooda, former chief minister of Haryana, had attended Wednesday's G-23 meeting held at the residence of former Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, Ghulam Nabi Azad. According to Congress sources, Hooda wants the post of Haryana Pradesh Congress Committee chief.

There is a possibility the charge is eventually given to his son Deepender Singh Hooda, who is a Rajya Sabha MP, under a compromise formula.

After meeting Rahul, Hooda attended yet another meeting of the G-23 at Azad's place. Congress insiders said the party high command is considering offering organisational posts to Azad and deputy leader of opposition in Rajya Sabha Anand Sharma to thwart a crisis.

Meanwhile, Azad is likely to meet party president Sonia Gandhi on Friday. "Azad has sought time from Sonia Gandhi to convey G-23's views on strengthening the party," said a party leader.

On the other hand, a section of Gandhi loyalists have stepped up their demand for disciplinary action against some G-23 members. Following the comment of Kapil Sibal, one of prominent G-23 leaders, on the Gandhis, Chhattisgarh health minister T S Singh Deo called for his expulsion.

'No action against Kapil Sibal'

Amid calls by Gandhi loyalists for action against Kapil Sibal, who recently said Gandhis should step aside, Hooda told Rahul Gandhi such a step will be unacceptable to the G-23

Mixed response to K'taka bandh call over hijab verdict

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

THE bandh call given by some Muslim organisations to mark their protest against the Karnataka High Court verdict on the hijab issue evoked mixed response across the state. While in some places, business continued as usual, at other places commercial establishments owned by members of the community were completely shut.

The State Government, meanwhile, has taken serious note of the bandh, terming it as 'contempt of court'. Law Minister J C Madhuswamy told the Assembly on Thursday, "We will take action against them accordingly." He added that those unhappy with the judgment can appeal in the Supreme Court.

In the state capital Bengaluru, there was mixed response. Shops and businesses in areas like Shivajinagar, Commercial Street, Tannery Road, Frazer Town and Kalasipalya remained closed through the day. In many other areas, Muslim traders had kept their establishments open. At the epicentre of the controversy in Udupi, there was good response from the community as most shops were shut. In Dakshina Kannada district, a majority of Muslims shut their business establishments.

In Hubballi, Belagavi and Kalaburagi, there was poor response. However, the communally sensitive Bhatkal town in Uttara Kannada district turned into a fortress with businesses closed. REPORT: P4

Fans bring Appu to life with 'James' release

Fans of late Kannada actor Puneeth Rajkumar mark the release of his last commercial movie 'James' on his 47th birth anniversary, in Bengaluru on Thursday | SHRIRAM BN

A SHARADHAA @ Bengaluru

"PARAMAATHMANIGE saavilla" (There's no death to the Supreme Lord)! That is what came out strongly on Thursday as emotional fans of late Kannada actor Puneeth Rajkumar — fondly called Appu — celebrated the day for two reasons.

The darling of the crowds, a man with a golden heart, would have celebrated his 47th birthday on March 17, a day which also saw the release of his last film, 'James', an all-out success, thanks to emotional fans thronging theatres across the state and overseas. It was also his first birthday after his death on October 29, 2021.

'James' has set records not just all over Karnataka, but worldwide too. The film was released in 286 single screens, and 180 multiplexes across Karnataka.

Bengaluru alone had over 1,000 shows, and a total of over 2,000 shows across Karnataka. Worldwide, 'James', released in five languages, recorded over 4,000 shows.

The film bagged first day collection of over Rs 10 crore in Karnataka alone; and made an approximate collection of Rs 30 crore worldwide. With houseful shows, and tickets booked till this weekend, the team is expecting to join the Rs 100 crore club within a week.

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IMRAN KHAN
FIGHTS FOR SURVIVAL

The Pakistan PM is bracing for a no-confidence motion on March 28. Several members of the National Assembly of Khan's party have deserted him | P12

Rajnath opens R&D facility for stealth jet

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Bengaluru

A seven-storeyed, 1.3 lakh sqft Flight Control System (FCS) complex for research and development of the public sector HAL's Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) has been built in just 45 days.

The construction started on February 1. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Thursday inaugurated the facility, housed at the Aeronautical Development Establishment (ADE), alongside Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai.

The facility was built using hybrid technology, with a combination of conventional, pre-engineered and pre-cast methods. The construction of the complex itself breaks the record for the completion of a permanent seven-storeyed building using hybrid construction technology.

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